

Seven Shrines of the River Uulge

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Koala Bare Books

Y A W A L L A

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To

Thomas Andrew Harley

and the lovingkindness

and beauty

he lived

Seven Shrines of the River Uulge

I. The Shrine of Saint Thomas

They knock out towers and lines, no power no internet. No gas, 10 weeks. Still their bombs keep coming. I am cold. My hands freezing. I wear wool gloves, you know kind with fingers cut out of them. Barely I can type here now to save record of my last minutes or hours. Also, because bored. There is nothing else to do. I am hungry, but I rather starve to death than eat more can of beets.

The dictator is madman. He will never stop. His forces are massive. We know we are doomed. We know that death or worse will greet us soon, smiling. Still we hold out and we fight. Sometimes we make little victories give us more courage to keep fighting! I give you example: Just yesterday there was little rain and in afternoon on the street I found small puddle of fresh water to lap up and give my body nourishment for one more day. I celebrated with my neighbors, they found puddles too! We danced and sang. It was beautiful day. There were only 62 bombs that day, it gave us hope for future.

I can't belief that was only yesterday. My neighbors, I am not sure how many are left today. Maybe they are all dead. Maybe it is just me here now alone. I go outside but I see nothing and I hear nothing. At first I imagine I smell strudel but really it is just smoke and wind and smell of bodies. I keep kerchief over my face to block dust and rot smell. Also one tied around forehead and another around neck. We're big on kerchiefs around here. Here we have kerchiefs and beets, not much else. But still the dictator wants them I guess. That is how greedy he is.

Today I dream about yesterday. I dream about it! That perfect day. It is one of many memories I bring back to remind that not all is bad and once in this life there was joy and happiness. But yesterday is special because is so close, I can almost touch it. You know, you have memories like that, so close you feel you can reach out and touch? It was yesterday but it is all here with me right now. How we laughed at little Timo whose water puddle was shape like yellow cabbage! His older brothers and sisters teased him no end, and the baby thought it was pretty funny too. I can hear their laughter, I can see the sunlight shining in their happy faces. They're all dead now. I'm pretty sure. But then, then Lina and Olga struck up the cinder blocks and we all danced the Ploughmans Daughter Pluck The Chicken dance, you know the one where the girls flap their kerchiefs in the air, and we laughed some more, and then we each one of us shared with the others how we would like potato prepared if we ever see one again.

I get lost in these sweet memories if not careful. Yesterday comfort me but it must not make me comfortable. Not like the councilman who pretend are on our side, they are all talk, impressed by their own reputations and opinions, they write papers and support policies where they can be the heroes who swoop in and save us, they do nothing real to address our daily suffering, just a few token actions to puff up they own self worth, for almost 4 years we do not see them, we live right under their noses they look down on us with, they have no solidarity with the common people, they live overfed and content in their estates protected from all the misery and bloodshed. No, you can rest assured I will not get comfortable. I will not retreat into memories of yesterday, sweet as that would be. For the war continues. The fight continues! I will fight the dictator and his evil to the end. I will defy the councilman and his flowery, useless words. I re-tie my kerchiefs, steady my purpose and prepare for next challenge.

Oh. That one was close. I had to dust some rubble off typewriter. They are getting closer. I see there is one beet can left. I down it for strength. Suddenly there is knock at door. Someone is knocking! I am not alone after all! Is it possible I will have company in my final moments? I stumble to door through all the crap everywhere, the bookcase that fell off wall, my 78 records, they are all broken now, they cannot be replaced, Soylie Greenwood and the Hot Spots, gone forever, Lazslo's Pezel-Shakers, I will hear them never again, I hear them only in my memory now, I listened so much to them in the good times, I don't need these records any more, I don't care that they are broken now because I can remember every note of every song. Every note lives inside me. Every melody and harmony lives in me. I live every song and every beautiful thought and every kind deed in every moment I have left.

I make it to door. But who is it, who is on other side? Who else has survived? Is it Ghier the tanner? Schwerza from the nail and pickle shop? What if it is the enemy? Maybe I should not open door! It might be those Silesians who live through the alley-way, they always trying to sell me something.

Is nother knock at door. I think for moment. "Who is it?!" I yell through the door. "State your name and mission!" I like to sound all tough and official like that.

Well, I don't belief what I hear. A voice, not loud, calm. But a familiar voice, not voice I would mistake. It can't be true, can it? I unlock all the deadbolt, even undo both the chains and throw the door open. Through our neighborhood death-smoke I see a tall figure. I see he is barefoot. I look up. My ears did not trick me. It really is him.

“Tomasz!” I cry as I ran to him and we kiss each other on both sides of face, for total four kisses, as is local custom. “It can't be you. We had gave you up for dead.” It's true, we had. That was weeks, months ago! All this time I was sure I would never see Tomasz again. He was my best friend. We grew up together. We did everything together. We played music together. We smoked tiny cigars together. We ate beet salad together. We brewed Hfeerg together from age Church/School moved us to the long pants, and after many years we got so good we won Silver Kerchief at local Hfeerg brewing competition three years in a row. Well, second year we share silver with Vjongen but if you see that motherfucker tell him that he may stuff a turnip into the inside of his own ass. And it was our pole-stripping team that won regional championships the year the Uulge flooded her banks three times. Tomasz, the love of my life! And even as raised in Eastern Chyroptical Church I am not ashamed to say that! I loved him. And he loved me. We were inseparable! When I have those memories of the good times that sustain me, more of them are of Tomasz than anything else. And these many weeks since he gone, every time I have the close calls and think I will die in the very next moment, I close my eyes and smile in joy that soon I may be with Tomasz united again, that within the blink of the eye he and I will be play music and smoke little cigars and stripe the pole and brew Hfeerg together in Heaven forever and we never be apart again!

But here he's now, in front of me! Okay, well I'm gonna take a little break now. I'm getting kind of tired of typing. Also, I'm going to go hang out with Tomasz, my friend. I have not seen him in a really long time! So, be back later, maybe.

Okay, I'm back. You don't know how great it is to have Tomasz here! Just now we play dodgebomb together. We both won! And we did so many things together. We found only few small poles to stripe, as most have been blown to bits. We dance the Fisherman Spanks The Naughty Sow although it's not so fun with only two

people. We smoke some cigar butts we found. And Tomasz brought with him not one but two gifts: one smuggled bottle Hfeerg, and get this, a fresh beet, with the greens and everything, that he save just to share with me. That is what a true friend is like. I have never tasted anything so sweet. I cannot contain my happiness. I cry so many tears of joy, my kerchief soaked. But best part is when Tomasz tell me where the hell he been all this damned time.

Tomasz tell me a long, long story. He is still telling me this story! I myself don't know yet how it will end! Even with fingers almost frostbit I type it here as he tell it to me. So here we go. The bomb we thought kill him open up a big sinkhole and he fell inside. It so happen the hole empty into a tunnel he never knew was there before, I didn't know about it either, maybe thing leftover from three, four wars ago. Or maybe it was from the ancient times, we don't know, it doesn't really matter, but it was pitch black down there and he stumble around for days trying to find way out. The tunnel branch into more tunnels, and he turn this way, then that. He thought maybe he would die of thirst, then in one moment he barely saw a dim light at end of tunnel. He walk and walk toward the light for hours and hours. Sometimes the light went away for hours, but Tomasz kept going. He knew that was because it was nighttime. He just kept walking. He could do it. Tomasz walk thousands of miles in his lifetime. I walk a few with him but I could never keep up with him, my legs too short and stubby. These hobbit legs, I curse them. He walked everywhere. Walk anywhere on this earth and you are walking in his footsteps. So this journey, a journey of walking, it is nothing to Tomasz. He was born for this journey. He kept going. Walking, walking. He was so weak toward the end he was crawling to get to the light. Finally he reach the little opening the light come through, he dig with his hands to break it open bigger so he can fit through, he struggle for an hour but he never give up, at last he make it out the other side into... nother tunnel. Just a short one, though. Only few feet. That tunnel lead to cave on side of cliff. Tomasz crawled to the edge, there was big water puddle there he

lapped up like greedy puppy. He had made it out alive, after all that darkness. How long had it been? 8 days? After quenching his thirst he look up and out onto vista, the light blinded him but it was not bright out, it was twilight, he could see sun on horizon, it just been daylight for hours, he knew sun must be setting, he knew he was facing west. He had made it all the way to escarpment at edge of county! He couldn't belief. He know he have to make his way back to town. He had to check on all of us to make sure we survive bombs like he did! But not now. Exhausted in body but with the hydration he will sleep now, and go to that favorite place of our people, the land of dreams where all the dear things we lost come and pay us cheerful visits. And so Tomasz went to sleep there at edge of cave, underneath the moon and the beautiful stars.

When Tomasz woke up it was not yet light. Under light of the moon he made his way down the cliff wall and into the valley. Here surely he could find ox-cart or something to take him back to our village. He could walk but, he think maybe he have enough of that for a little while. You know? Tomasz look out onto the fertile valley. Here, not so far from the war, everything still look perfect like it always does, like it did when he and I were young and still wearing the shorts and our families would work on the farms here during the harvest seasons. Who could forget all our red-stained hands? When stains were fresh Tomasz and I use to pretend to be evil butchers with bloody hands and we borrowed our mamas aprons and knives and we use things like pig skull or winter squash in place of yak roast and we go around with a cart and scare all the little girls and they run away screaming and me and Tomasz laugh and laugh and laugh until we cry. And then start laughing again. And cry again. And then our mamas scream at us, "Bring back to us our knives and also our aprons, you bad boys! For it is time for us to make for you both the dinner!" And then we really start laughing. No cry, only laugh. And then we run inside and our mamas make the dinner and our papas pop open a nice warm Hfeerg, and it is time for the end of nother beautiful day.

But here now at start of day, in the valley with sun just rising over, Tomasz saw not a soul working in the beet fields, no familiar face to remind him of the good old times, not even one stereotypical bekerchiefed babushka pushing the hand-plow and smiling at the camera to show remaining teeth for British documentary. More important he find there nothing to eat. Only row after row of fallow land, just few tiny scraps of vegetable or grain. After more than week starving in the tunnels he must find food to give him strength for his journey home. He find mushroom growing under tree, no. Dead baby skunk not sure how long been there, no. Chimichanga with fire ants all over, he come back if he find nothing better. When Tomasz wander onto old pilgrim's road, he hope his breakfast choices will improve. This road since Medieval period carry students and the faithful and really whoever wants to go in pilgrimage up the escarpment to the falls and rapids and healing waters and sacred grottoes that gather where the Uulge river, that beautiful bitch, cascades in glory to the gleaming valley below at Schroot Cataract. Don't bother, it's all cheap and touristy now. And the prices. For cost of 10-pack kerchiefs you could buy Hfeerg ingredients enough to cater large circumcision. There on the ancient worn path in the quiet morning, Tomasz enjoy the cool breeze and the birds calm singing with only rare sound of far away bombs until faintly he heard engine struggling in the distance. A minute later he hear it much louder, coming up from behind him. He turn to see large contraption heading up the road in his direction, some kind of carriage but without-a the horse! Don't be silly, fuckface. I know you think I am some kind of rube. I know it was car. I have seen a car before. I have driven many cars. I fix cars. I almost get run over by them every day, and that is during the peace times. Fuckface.

But this was no ordinary automobile Tomasz seen coming fast directly toward him. And hearing as well, with the engine churning and the wheels rattling and the suspension creaking and the horn honking. Also headlights flashing, which is another seeing thing, along with the tripping paint job in every color in the sun, is how

you say like psychotic delicatessen, on top of the vehicles original white or kind of off-white I guess paint job. This vehicle, you can see it in your minds eye now, don't you? You got it. It was 1995 Dodge Caravan. Or maybe '94, Tomasz says. Oh, and also there was a thing about it he was both seeing and hearing, and that was the sound of the people in the '95 Dodge Caravan screaming at him to get out of their way, and the sight of them through windshield with the mouths of their faces opening and shutting as they make these screeches of protest.

Tomasz stepped to side of the road as the mini-van ground to halt. The brakes made very little noise. They were pretty good actually. It was quiet again in the valley. Oop, one bomb. But other than that. A man with large mustache leaned out passenger side window.

“We're late for the retreat! I think we've got room for one more. Are you in, big boy?”

The Caravan contain four passengers. Tomasz told them his name, told of them to his plight, and his need to get back soon as possible to our village. He said how hungry he was, that he was starving, literally starving.

“Oh my God, I'm starving,” exclaim a red-headed woman in the back seat. “I've had nothing since a NutriGruel and two strawberries at 6 p.m.!”

“Get out of here, you will wreck your metabolism with that kind of irresponsibility!” said person next to her, woman with black hair with some grey coming in. “So un-glycemic. Remember, you have to eat to diet! Self care is the only real care. You can't help others until you've helped yourself!”

“So true!” said red-head woman. “I’ve been a fool.” She stared off into distance. “I don’t guess we can hit a Panera or something real quick?”

“You must be joking!” exclaim the driver, a small blond-haired man. “We’re going to be late as it is!”

“Listen here, Tommy boy,” said big-mustached man as the ladies slide side door open for Tomasz to hop in. “There’ll be marvelous food and everything else you can imagine where we’re going! And maybe even a few things you can’t imagine!” he said in suggestive way, winking at the driver. Tomasz sat down as redhead move over to middle seat. He slide door closed just as driver hit the gas. He was grateful to find one Mueslick bar in compartment on the door, which he try to nibble discreetly as no to offend. It wasn’t much but was first he have to eat in a long time.

“Whew!” the redhead said, waving her hand in front of face. “Have you been working down in a mine shaft for a month?” The black-haired woman began holding nose. Tomasz explain that yes, that was pretty much it.

“You ladies don’t worry,” said big-mustached man, half to them, half to blond driver man, and third half to their new passenger. I have a feeling this young man is going to clean up nicely!” Tomasz just sat there finishing his Mueslick.

“He looks so strong and rugged!” said the black-haired woman as she reach around the redhead to squeeze Tomasz on shoulder muscle. The big-mustached man turned up volume on the car stereo. It was Broadway showtunes from 1960s. Sound of Music. Fiddler. Oliver! Things like that.

And so they made their way up pilgrim's road toward the sacred waters. In his seat Tomasz thought only of us, his family and friends back in the village. He knew after 9 days we already give up searching for him and are now grieving and he want to cut short our sorrow and surprise us that yes, he has made it after all! Also he worry about all of us and want to know we have made it too! Spoiled alert, at the end it is just me and him left, probably! But anyway Tomasz think maybe he will put up with these people for a little while, maybe few hours, and maybe after that he will make it home soon. Maybe he even get a good meal and bath out of it! So he can have proud big belly and smell nice for us when he return! The thermal baths are such a delight for body and soul and with the blockade and the siege it has been so many months since he could make it out here to take them. Yes I will enjoy that, he think to himself. I deserve it. I'm worth it! I've been through a lot, fuck. And my village is worth it. Their nostrils deserve that they may savour the odour of human freshly bathed. And after 9 days they can wait few more hours to know that their bro Tomasz still lives! Stereo system swelled. "If I were a rich man, yoybie deedum deydel..." He smile to himself as he turn his head to look out window at the lovely valley morning as 1995 Dodge Caravan made slow ascent up the hallowed old road.



II. The Shrine of Saint Matilda

Tomasz tell me how surprise he was to see that parking lot for Swami Sheik Scharwenka's Metaphysical-Carnal Palace and Palisades was so full at 10 on Thursday morning. The place was hopping. Go to our village and others within 30 or 40 km of this place and you are a world away with the war, you are in developing world, it is pre-industrial, even pre-historic, you are back to stone ages with basics of food and power and sanitation. But over here near Unesco World Heritage Site, with the damned waterfall and shrines and all that, everything seem fine and modern and stable and it business as usual and business is booming and the booming of the bombs I guess is not so close enough to scare away the silly city people with the money and the huckster who is happy to take it away from them. It took couple minutes for small blond-haired man to find place to park. He was frantic as he carefully pull '95 Caravan into barely big enough space.

“See?! We're late right now! Right now this very second! You know how the Swami is!”

“Calm down, Maurice,” said big-mustached man. “I'll smooth things over, just like I always do.”

They could hear muffled “Om” coming through the heavy door as the retreat was already mid-chant when it creak open for the five latecomers to enter assembly hall. The chanting cease immediately. Heads turned back to look at them. Tomasz could feel eyes of the Swami stabbing him like a hundred darts.

“Let nothing perturb your beautiful mind,” said Swami through gritted teeth. “Just keep singing our sacred word, Om...” The chanting started up again as Swami on his little stage pretend to shut his eyes again in prayer. “Om...” chanted redhead and black-haired lady. Big-mustached man passed a crumpled bill to doorman with whisper of apologies and they took last seats left at back of room, while Tomasz prefer to just sit on floor against the wall.

After few minutes a little alarm go off. “Okay, that's enough of that.” The chanting cease. “Well!” The Swami smiled very big, turning his hugely turbaned head this way and that to everyone in room. “How are we?” Tomasz could still feel the darts when Swami's eyes met him and others at the back. “Calm? Centered?” he asked as he unwrap a cough drop and pop it into his mouth. “Remember that all of life is transitory, and time is of no essence!” He look at his watch, then say something to one of his large henchmen. “Ten fifteen, time for your morning workshops!”

Tomasz hear huge sigh of relief as everyone relax from all their meditating. People start standing up and shuffling around and looking at their programs as the Swami is wheeled off stage. “Here, you'll need this!” said big-mustached man, slipping pass and program into Tomasz' hand like it something illegal. “The ladies have chosen the workshop on Sustainability in Hypoallergenic Fashion, I believe,” he say dourly, then brightening, “Maurice and I are attending the one on Fearless Tantric Giving, and we'd like you to know you're more than welcome to join us!” Tomasz say he have his eye on Eco-Consciousness in Eastern European Cuisine and maybe he catch up with them later. But anyway he must go to river first to get cleaned up. “Oh, of course!” said big-mustached man. “You could use a bit of a rub-a-dub, couldn't you?” Tomasz few times made assurance that he need no assistance with his bathing before leaving retreat to walk to the river. “Okay. We'll see you when you get back!” said big-mustached man with a wink and he make a kissy face.

Crossing wide River Boulevard, Tomasz turn his head to look east up the street and marvel at all the restaurant and souvenir shop and book shop and auto shop and sex shop here for the rich people and business people and tourists. At same time he felt yearning, for in same direction miles beyond lay our humble little village. With the military checkpoints the boulevard is no longer good route home, so he will have to find nother way to get back to us. He will figure it out somehow! But for now he will treat himself to luxury of dip in the sacred water. This is ancestral water of our people, the same water he and I were baptize in some quarter-century ago! Now across the street, walking along pathways to the river, Tomasz navigate the traffic of adults with their dumbfounded faces and children holding the ice creams as they follow the tour guides to the seven shrines that grace this holy destination. Out of them all, Tomasz know it is the one to St. Mathilde where he will head. For not only is she patron saint of our village and namesake of our local parish, but her shrine is not so very popular as some of others and he can get a bath in peace.

And there she is, the roaring Uulge, lifeblood of our land, tears of a trillion angels! Tomasz stood on the bank for a moment before he cross the sturdy footbridge to the far side of river where thermal springs fed deep in the good earth pool up and join with these clear rushing waters that flow a thousand miles down from the mountains before they plunge into the lush valley. Tomasz remember everything about this place from our childhood, and for the moment specially the little grove of fruit trees hid away in a corner of park near to Mathilde's shrine, and there he was thankful to find few nearly ripe plums to satisfy his starvation, first real food he have in two week, keeping in mind Mueslick bar from car ride. Tomasz hope this will not spoil his appetite for marvelous food he was promised at Swami's retreat! Next to shrine he find a little lonely pool to have to himself. He take off his dirty rags and spread them out on a sunny rock to air out before stepping into the warm bubbly waters.

Well with his hunger less and now engulf in the warm womb of the sacred pools, Tomasz feel like he dine and gone to heaven! After half hour he think maybe he will miss most of Eco-Consciousness in Eastern European Cuisine and will have to try nother foodie-type workshop later. He brought program with him here! Let's see. Oh, lunch at 12:00, he have only 45 minutes to wait for that! But then at 1:00 is Intentionality in Awakening Your Inner Hunter/Gatherer with Paleogastronomy, that one sound pretty good too. Shit what am I doing, Tomasz thought to himself. My people are waiting for me. He thought of the tears of his mama and his papa, and me, his best friend! He cry himself to think of our grief since after 9 days we must believe he is gone forever. And I cry now to think of it. For his mama and papa both went this morning to their graves not knowing he still alive. Only I, Miklas, his best friend, have survive to know that Tomasz himself survive all those months ago! And now we both cry here together thinking of all those we have lost in the war, but at same time laugh and rejoice that now, with bombs falling all around us, we soon be together with them all in paradise!

The towel woman brought towel to Tomasz as he got out of the water. We have the towel woman here. She's old woman who brings you towel. You naked, your dingle hanging out, she don't care. She the towel woman. She old woman, she seen everything. Tomasz dried off and thanked her, he put back on his clothes, kerchiefs and all, they seem fresher now. He decide he will just hit the lunch at retreat real quick and get the hell out of there to find his way to our beloved village. But first of course he must pay his respects and say his prayers at the Shrine of Our Blessed Saint Mathilde.

He stood in awe of her worn marble statue as he did since we both toddled, with sun through the trees lighting up her kind features. Not most splendid monument or most florid grotto here at the waters but there's something about her. Her nun's frock, the modest crown on her head, holding her trusty needlepoint, a hawk from her king husband Henry The Fowler resting on her shoulder. He prayed.

O Gracious Queen Mathilde, Jewel of Saxony, renowned by your devotion to God in piety and to the poor in charity, hear our prayer. Daughter of Dietrich and Reinhild, consort of Heinrich, mother of his son Heinrich and of Emperor Otto, godmother of the Holy Roman Empire, hear our prayer. Mother also of Bruno, Hedwig and Gerberga, hear our prayer. Matriarch and abbess of Nordhausen and Quedlinburg, hear our prayer. Benevolent queen, we humbly ask that you intercede on our behalf. You who lived a life in service to God and the common people, beseech the Lord that His Holy Spirit may move us to acts of service in your honor. You whose own royal sons ridiculed her generosity to the poor, ask our Heavenly Father to melt the hearts of our Leaders that they may bestow mercy and compassion on the afflicted and downtrodden. That all the people may show their righteousness before the Lord. For the Apostle has written that in the Last Judgment He will welcome into Heaven the righteous who fed the hungry, succored the thirsty, cared for the sick, clothed the naked, sheltered the homeless, welcomed the foreigner and visited the imprisoned. And the unrighteous who have not fed the hungry, succored the thirsty, cared for the sick, clothed the naked, sheltered the homeless, welcomed the foreigner and visited the imprisoned will be cast into darkness. Hear our prayer, Blessed Saint Mathilde. Please pray for us all in Jesus' name. Amen.

The whole prayer in tiny letters is on big plaque almost as wide as she is tall. But Tomasz does not need to look at it. He have it memorized since he was a boy. He just stood transfixed on her beautiful face as he pray the words from his heart for himself and for our people and for the whole world.

“And here we have Saint Mathilde!” the tour guide interrupt Tomasz' devotion. “Mathilde of Ringelheim, circa 892 to 968, date of canonization uncertain, feast day March 14th, she is the patron saint of widows and large families!”

“Very well-researched!” remarked a weeping woman all in black with heavy veil and holding rosary with many children behind her.

“Why does she have a parrot on her shoulder? Is she a pirate?” asked a little boy as he point with his hand not with snow cone in it.

“Don't ask inane questions, Bobby,” scolded his mother.

The tour guide laugh. “Yes!” He bend down toward the child. “She's a pirate, and she's going to steal your booty! And make you walk the plank, aargh!” The boy screamed and then laughed, his face smeared with snow cone as his mother hustle him to the side while giving tour guide dirty look.

Tomasz departed the shrine. Just then he remember today was feast day of St. Maximilian Kolbe, how could he forgot! He should visit that shrine as well! But there is no time now. He spend to much time in his bathing. By the time he cross the footbridge back over the river it was 5 minute to noon He have just enough time to hurry back over to retreat for lunch! At Swami's Palace the workshops were just let out and people mingling everywhere in the halls as Tomasz flash his pass to re-enter retreat.

“I love this, it is so aspirational and logo-forward!” discussed black-haired woman with grey coming in to nother woman while they both fondle fabric of garment on ivory hanger. “Also cruelty free... and a little transgressive!” savored other woman. “Oh, there you are!” said black-haired woman, seeing Tomasz. “Billy and Maurice have been looking everywhere for you!” Tomasz thanked her as he pass through the people and use his nose to try to find where the food is. “Oh, it's you!” exclaim redhead woman as he pass her. “Wow, you do clean up nice, don't you?” she remark before going into little coughing fit as Tomasz smile at her and then keep going to find the food.

When Tomasz finally arrive at the table in the banquet hall, he was speechless to see all the array of fine foods spread out before him waiting for him to devour. There was Mecklenburg roast ribs and Kalingrad meatballs; Swabian dumplings in cream sauce and baked smoked eel; potato pancakes with applesauce and bacon-wrapped fried asparagus spears; spaetzle with sheep milk pecorino and spaghetti with meatballs; whole roast duck with apple compote and smoked sardines with Peloponnese olives on ciabatta toast. There was schnitzels and rouladen and fine Dylewska ham. There was cabbage rolls and crepes. There was green salads and fruit salads and potato salads and jello salads and even a beetroot salad (Tomasz think he skip that since he get enough of it at home). To drink there was Mosel wines and real Champagne and sweet tea and unsweet tea and Big Red and Belgian ale. For dessert there was red groats, gingerbread, black bread pudding, elderberry soup, sour cream cake, poppy seed cake, Black Forest cake, and three different flavor of wheat blintzes. Also there was bratwursts, currywursts, and kielbasa; goulash, barbacoa, sauerbraten, and hunter's stew with hearty pumpernickel; red borscht with mushroom dumplings; Black Sea sturgeon caviar with homemade kettle-cooked potato chips; and mac and cheese.

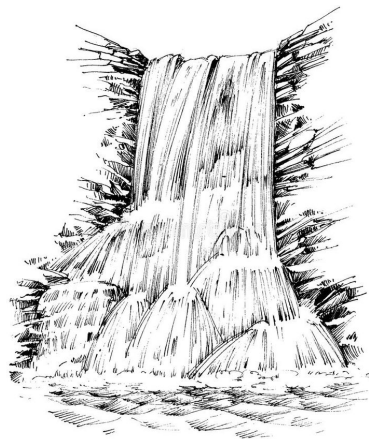
“Here he is, Maurice! We had a feeling we'd find you here, hungry boy!” said big-mustached man winking, small blond-haired man adding, “Where on earth have you been? Billy and I have been worried sick! Haven't we, Billy?” “Why yes, we have, Maurice! Little Tommy here has been a bad boy! He may need some discipline,” and big-mustached man crack a small leather whip against his own thigh, then drawing his tongue across lips and bared teeth in seductive manner. “Something to look forward to in our afternoon workshop in Furious Buttloving of the Highest Order.” “That's not what it's called!” blond-haired man laughed as he give a little smack to arm of big-mustache man, who insisted “Oh, yes it is!” and then they both fall over each other in laughter. Tomasz told them he was really looking forward to it, as soon as lunchtime is over! He quickly grab an empty plate off the side table.

Just then over the buzzing of lunchtime crowd everyone heard a whistling sound overhead and wonder if this is some kind of musical soundtrack the Swami has planned for the lavish meal they are about to partake. There is a moment of silence. Then huge explosion. The entire earth shook. The convivial atmosphere now switch to pandemonium. Everywhere people screaming and crying. People coughing and wheezing. People dead and dying. The room is turned upside down. All the fine art fallen off what few walls are left. There is more food now all over the people than there is on the table. In fact none is on table because table is overturned, and what is on the floor have crappy ceiling popcorn all over it.

“This isn't part of the retreat, Maurice, is it?” ask big-mustached man before losing his consciousness. Maurice didn't answer.

“So logo-free... and cruelty-forward...” muttered black-haired woman, dazed.

Red-headed woman crawled out of a smoking pile of rubble. “I... would like... A REFUND,” she say before collapsing.



III. The Shrine of Saint Vincent de Paul

“This isn't supposed to happen,” Swami Sheik Scharwenka shrieked into microphone held by news reporter. In the blast he lost his turban, he have hairnet over his hair, a fake eyelash hanging from one eyelid. “This isn't supposed to happen! All the pertinent authorities have been assuring us for many months that this zone is off limits to the shelling. Now just look at my beautiful Palace!” Swami looked back behind him, gesturing. “And the Palisades, too! Whatever will we do? The Hague is going to hear about this!”

Outside on River Boulevard there was emergency vehicles, first responders rushing all about, people standing around with blankets around them, even though it is late summer. That's funny, isn't it? Always with the blankets around them, no matter what time of year. Something about being in shock make people feel like it is winter. Tomasz himself make it out with only few scratches, no more injuries than he have with the bomb that sent him to the tunnels! He was always lucky that way. And so he go around trying to help out the medics with all the people who are hurt, bringing them water, comforting them, saying prayers of healing. Smoke was rising from south side of boulevard. Some of Swami's Palace still standing, but next door is not so lucky. Disney Store, Smokerz Paradize, and Lewd Linda's Tarot Prognostications and Supernatural Curios have been completely flatten. After helping out for a while, Tomasz wonder what he will do now. He could almost taste those ribs and meatballs and dumplings and cakes but got not even one bite. All he have to eat now is one Mueslick bar and four plums. Well, only three and a half plums, because one he saw have worm in it and he threw the rest on the ground for the birds and squirrels. Because that is what our people are like. We are generous and caring for other creatures of this earth to a fault.

Tomasz saw group of people in business attire shuffling like single organism toward the camera crew. One of them step out of group to talk to the reporter. Guess who it was? Yes, it was that asshole councilman! Of course! Mr. Johnny On The Spot, stepping in to take charge! You don't remember him? Pay attention. Chapter 1, 5th paragraph. The lady reporter recognized councilman and immediately began to assault and pepper him with questions, which he try to answer in halting manner. Tomasz overhear some of their conversation.

“Was this a stray bomb or a deliberate attack? Until this matter is fully investigated by all the invested parties, we won't know for sure. In the meantime, our hearts go out to the people of the Schroot Historical District who are enduring this senseless tragedy. And rest assured our offices will be working day and night to bring relief to the many who are struggling and suffering. Okay. Thank you, Mirga.”

“Thank you, Councilman, and there you have it. We're just going to have to leave it there. From the westernmost end of River Boulevard, the site of this horrific bombing just after noon today that has taken dozens of lives, resulted in countless injuries, and destroyed a number of thriving businesses, this is Mirga Verforden, Eyewitness News. Back to you, Jackie.”

That fucking piece of shit. Yes, he is very concerned about the struggling and suffering, isn't he? In our village struggling and suffering is just normal Tuesday. It is all we have ever known. But still we smile and laugh and dance through it all because we have each other and we love each other and we make a beautiful life despite it all. No thanks to the hollow councilman and all the other phony Bologna fucks like him. *spit* They teach us for many years that we are on our own.

Oh. Tomasz tells me to tell you that Dodge Caravan was 1994 after all. He have Chilton manual here. They are one of few thing aside from me and him that have survive the bombs. He show me differences in cup holder, it checks out.

Oop. Bomb. Anyway he don't see those people, Maurice and the others ever again. They are just something else lost along the way like much else in our lives. He continued on his way. By mid-afternoon he was in the forests north of the river hiking east toward you-know-where! He is going to get to our village by the hooks or the crooks! He pick up some more fruit near the waters, he also find wild nuts and berries growing along the way, it will be enough to sustain him. A few creeks that flow into the river will provide him water. Even with no transport he know he can make it here in under 2 days. Trip is much faster when you are not underground in maze of tunnels! Still... more walking! But as I say before, Tomasz was born for this journey. This journey Tomasz born for was. Having been born for the thing was relationship between journey and Tomasz. So he hiked through the woods. He enjoyed the beauty of nature and all the woodland creatures. In late afternoon he befriended a family of badgers and share his nuts with them. Just as sun was going down he chance upon a small cave that will provide him shelter. It been a long day, he will crash here. And so Tomasz went to sleep there at edge of cave, underneath the moon and the beautiful stars. I know I use that before but I use it again because I like it. Tomasz tell me that actually it was cloudy that night, but moon and stars are still up there, aren't they?

In the morning he continued his hiking. It has now been 10 days. Around mid-morning he walked into a clearing and found pasture where dairy cows were grazing. Some run away from him but one with huge udders was so sweet and compliant and let Tomasz drink fresh milk for breakfast freshly squeezed straight from her bosom. She liked it, he thinks. At midday he reached edge of forest and see

he has made it to riverside town of Geferdefelle. He is almost halfway home! By this time tomorrow he will be with us again, God willing! But I guess God was not willing, was He? For Tomasz return not after 11 days but after more than 4 months! What happened, Tomasz? What took you so long? He says it is a long story, and there is so much more to tell. He warn me also that the story just get weirder from here and I will not belief it by the time he reach the end. Well, okay. Tomasz, were you shacking up with pretty washermaiden or something for all these months? You can tell me, I won't judge. He promises that was not it, he would tell me. Even though it would make me jealous. He say he would not lie to me. He say he loves me. I tell him I love him too. I do love him, that Tomasz. So very much. I cannot describe my joy that he is here again with me right now. And he say he would not leave us for so long believing he is dead, just for silly fling. He would not do that to us. All our Holy Bibles are destroyed so he swear upon stack of Chilton manuals everything he is telling me is true! So I will keep typing here what he tells me, no matter how crazy it seem. And you can judge for yourself whether not it is true!

Walking toward Geferdefelle town limits, Tomasz seen a figure approach him on the dirt road. He know he must be very careful. Not because of bombs. For the bombs have stopped at Geferdefelle, because it is now occupied town! The dictator's forces have taken over, they are everywhere here. He surprised in fact he have not run into them already. But Tomasz quickly see it is not soldier approaching him, but a decrepit old crone. She was wearing many shawls and hobbling forward with handhewn wooden cane. When he saw the kerchief around her hair he knew she was good people. And when she saw his around his neck she knew the same of him. They smile at one another as they got closer. She was itty bitty woman, only 147 cm, she have to crane her neck to look up at Tomasz who is quite tall, 190 cm. No I will not convert to feet and inches for you. Tomasz kneel down to get more to her level. Now he have to look up a little bit to talk to her! But not before they kiss on both sides of cheek for total four kisses, as is local custom.

“What has happened to you, young man? You look like you been working down in coal mine for a month!” Tomasz explain that yes, that was pretty much it. Then he felt sad because after the bomb blast and more walking his freshness from the bath has worn off some! But then the old crone was with her eyes wide open and her eyebrows raised as he tell her all he been through the past 10 days. Then she tell him of conditions in Geferdefelle, the checkpoints and stations on every corner, that they have only let her out of the city because she bribe an officer with some streusel. She tell him it would be best to stay away from this place, maybe he can pick up food and transport in Shwerviefenburg where military is not so present, it's only 6.5 km more to the east, no I will not convert to miles for you. Then they are about to go their separate way, but first they hold their hands and give prayers of blessings on each other, and then she ask Tomasz if she may read his palm, because she's palmreader, and he say yes.

She took his strong but gentle hand in hers and study it for a minute. Then she speak softly. “You are very lucky man. You will have some hardship. But you will also have many blessings and happiness. You will not be so wealthy in money, but you will know much love and have many children and grandchildren. You will live a very long life. 100 years!”

Tomasz doubted such a fortune for himself, but he did not show his septicemia to the old crone and thanked her. Then they went through kissing routine again, although it is only total of two kisses when saying goodbye, and parted. Many children and grandchildren? He will live to 100? If she say so. In our village we are surprised when we live to next week. And here with Tomasz as I type his story, we are both surprised when we live to the next hour, and next minute, and next second! But we will just keep going, as long as we can! If we survive long enough for Tomasz to finish his story that will be the frosting on the cake of simply having him here with me again.

So. Tomasz continue on his way to Shwerviefenburg. It's 18 km west of our village. and we know many people there. He can walk there in just few hours, so if he find ride there maybe he can reach our village by this very evening! It made Tomasz excited to think about. He thinks he will hit up our friends Paolo and Vincenzo here, they are best buds just like me and Tomasz! We were in competition with the pole-striping, and the year our team won regional championships it was Paolo and Vincenzo's team that placed 2nd. Then next year their team won gold, but only because Tomasz fracture his ankle that year and could not compete! You see in pole striping the striping is the easy part. You have to get up pole first, not so easy with bad leg! Tomasz is such a trooper, he say he can climb the poles even with both ankle broken, but our Church/School doctor forbid it and would not allow him to climb. Tomasz was real mad about it. But those were the good years, before the war ruined everything. Anyway yes, Paolo and Vincenzo, we stripe many poles and drink many Hfeergs with them, they are standup bros! They have cool BMX bike shop here, front for underground operations. They will help Tomasz out if they are around!

It was late afternoon when Tomasz found a little side road and snuck in past town limits. He was quickly able to blend in with townspeople going about daily business, even as dictator's soldiers patrol the streets with their rifles. A minute later he found himself on main street which runs all the way to the Uulge. The town still looked okay those months ago, not like it is today all bombed out almost as bad as our village! Tomasz admire all the shops, the Pig Stand restaurant, the heavy Romanesque town hall, finally the magnificent Krampf- und Shwerviefenburger Philharmoniker where we often attended concerts in the good years. Last one we been to was 7 year ago, almost to the day, wasn't it, Tomasz? Christmas Nutcracker Tchaikowsky. Thinking of it, those lovely dancers and soaring symphony remind us that even we poor could deserve something nice once in a while. One block more, and he turn onto street where Paolo and Vincenzo have their bike shop, and sure enough it's still there! Tomasz enter the shop.

Standing behind the counter, Vincenzo look like he seen a ghost. "Tomasz! How can this be? We heard you were dead! Paolo! Look who is here!" Paolo come up from the back and let out a scream when he see who it is. Then they all laugh and have group hug. There were total of eight kisses. Look, this is how you figure it out. Paolo and Vincenzo are both in same party, so they do not kiss each other, only Tomasz kiss both of them. The four kisses are exchange only between members of different parties. Where a, b, c, etc. = the number of people in each party, and k = total number of kisses, then:

4/k() HAVE TO FIGURE THIS OUT – GENERALIZED FORMULA

So if I had been with Tomasz it would been total 16 kisses! But I was not there, and Paolo and Vincenzo thought that was strange because they never see him alone without me before! That when Tomasz explain his story about the bomb and the sinkhole and the tunnels and the retreat and the other bomb again. He figure he will have to tell it many more times before the week is up! Paolo and Vincenzo look at each other and discuss for a minute, yes they will help Tomasz with a ride in their Jeep to our village, they just have to close shop a little early, business was slow that day anyway. Then they all see that on television there is right now interview with the dictator on the news, so they turn down the Lofi Hip-Hop for Study and Relaxation and pump up the volume on television to see what that fucking asshole is saying.

"Well, Mirga, I think your question belies a fundamental misconstrual of the nature of this engagement." The interviewer blinked few times. These words you use... war, bombings, occupation, mass graves... have you not considered BON-BON, BORIS!" A monkey popped bon-bon into dictator's mouth. "Have you not considered their higher-level embeddedness in the very

nature of public discourse on how we narrativize the histories of our own societies as cultures?" There was pause as dictator finish bon-bon. "Schrootenseehallen Province is not descending into the dark nihilism of your bleak buzzwords, the sensationalist catchphrases of your mass media, no offence, Mirga, but your mass media zombifying BORIS, BON-BON! ... your mass media zombifying the populace with your glitzy production, your fetishization of circuses, and your commodification of gloom. I reject your premise. We are now seeing the fruition of a dazzling myriad of politico-historical Schrootensees. It's invigorating. Yes, there may be some pain BON-BON! ... but redemption and renewal in a Nietzschean sense are never not quite not at some cost in the perpetual spiral of everything, now aren't they?" he asked blinking and smiling.

"But, sir, everyone has seen the newsreels of the devastation. Many incidents are being investigated as war crimes..."

"Ah. There you go again," dictator chuckled. "You just can't help yourselves, I realize. Well, I think we've prevailed here. Look, Mirga, and may I say how lovely you look tonight, but if some of the people in the lesser villages of the Schrootenseewhateveryoucallit are feeling a little sad tonight, just tell them to do what I do when I am sad: pop a little bon-bon into my mouth!" The dictator laughed a little laugh and turned his head to look at monkey and stared at it for few seconds before Paolo shut off television in disgust.

The three of them was all throwing the bird to the dictator while he was speaking. But those bon-bon sure look good to Tomasz. Paolo and Vincenzo know he's starving and give him a little to eat, they have some leftover polenta and borscht in the back. They try to heat it up for him but Tomasz could not wait. It tasted so good to him, even cold. He was so grateful to his good and faithful friends who attend to him in body, not just in spirit.

“You have to admit, he makes some good points,” said goofy little man in sweater looking at bikes in the shop. Paolo and Vincenzo turn their heads to look at him. Tomasz paid no attention, just kept eating. He was so hungry. You don't know what this moment is for Tomasz, to finally get some real food! You don't know how much he love to eat. But I know. I cook many meals for Tomasz. Not as many as his mama, of course! Or his papa, and his other mama! Or even his real bro, Krzysztof. He cook for him too. Krzysztof! He love Tomasz even more than I do. How perfect it would be if Krzysztof was here with us right now! But it is just me and Tomasz. So I cook for Tomasz a lot too. Tomasz not so good at cooking as me, he do most things better than me, he always kicks my ass in karate, every time, but his cooking kind of blows to be honest. I'm sorry Tomasz, but it does. He says he has gotten better, he has had some practice, I say, when? It's okay, Tomasz. I love to cook for you as much as you love it. I wish I could cook something for you right now, and for myself as well, but there is no stove that work and no food to cook. Or just eat raw. That fresh beet with the greens and the bottle of Hfeerg that he brought to my door yesterday is all we had! Oop, bomb.

Paolo and Vincenzo dust themselves off oh wait. Bomb was here, not where they were. Okay. Never mind. No bomb in story. Not now anyway. Bomb was here, just now. I get confuse. Starvation and bombs will do that to you. It is Tomasz and I now who dust ourselves off. So anyway, they went over and talk to the goofy little man in sweater while Tomasz ate.

“What do you say? Dictator makes some good points, does he?” Vincenzo asked. He and Paolo were cowering over the little man.

“Well!” he cleared his throat. “I just meant that his praxis is pretty well-developed. Oh, he's a bad guy all right! No arguments from me. I don't like him.” he shook his head.

“Well, good,” Paolo said. “Or we were going to ask you to leave our shop. You have to leave anyway because we close up early to help out our bud Tomasz! So, buy something now, or get out.”

“Hey, look at me!” goofy little man shouted and he tried to do a stupid little jump with one of the BMX bikes and wiped out. “Oh, no! Did I damage it?” he grimaced from floor.

“No. It's fine,” Vincenzo helped the man up while Paolo picked up the bike and Tomasz sat eating his cold polenta, now with borscht on top of it. “Are you all right, little guy? Hey, Paolo, look at this goofy little guy, trying to do a dumb little jump!” They both laughed. Tomasz laughed too.

“He's a goofy little fellow, isn't he?” Paolo answered, adjusting man's sweater. The little man got mad and there was a vein in his nose that stuck out when he was feeling anger. This made them laugh at him even more. That made the man even madder and vein in his nose stick out even more. Then they die laughing, they couldn't stop. Then Paolo said as he nudge Vincenzo, “Hey, goofy guy. We like you, you are good for some laughs. We like to keep you around. Why don't you come with us while we give our friend Tomasz here ride to his village?”

“Oh, can I? That sounds like so much fun! You guys are cool! Maybe I can put this life experience on my CV!

“Whatever, just hop in the Jeep and let's bounce,” Vincenzo said. “Yeah, let's bounce,” said Paolo and Tomasz agreed that yes, it was time to bounce, and they close up the shop just as sun trying to set.

“Yeah! Let's bounce!” little goofy man exclaim and they all laugh.

And so they bounced. Tomasz was still chewing the last of his polenta as they hurry out the door. Then as they driving away they all start laughing as they list what Hollywood actors will play them in the movie they make of this story. Tomasz will be play by John Krasinski with big beard and curly-hair wig, Tomasz's papa by Denzel Washington, but if Denzel is not available they go with Samuel L. Jackson and they take his character in a more hard-ass direction. "Where the fuck are your motherfucking shoes, Tomasz?" They all laugh so much. Then his mama will be play by Jodie Foster, his other mama by Salma Hayek, his bro Krzysztof by Wilmer Valderrama, news lady Mirga Verforden by Jennifer Lawrence, the dictator by Edward Norton, Swami by Kevin Spacey, Billy by Paul Giamatti, Maurice by William H. Macy, they go with Nicole Kidman and Angelina Jolie for the red- and black-haired ladies, Gary Oldman as the tour guide, he could really play all of these parts, a very aged Kristin Chenoweth as the itty bitty old crone, Vincenzo like Adam Driver for himself, Paolo think he go with Adrien Brody, and for me, Miklas, they pick a de-aged Brad Pitt! Well, I would go with de-aged and thinner Brendan Fraser, but I'll take it.

"Who plays me?" asked goofy little man, still in his sweater.

The laughter die down and there was silence. Finally Vincenzo say, "Either Jason Momoa or Dwayne Johnson, The Rock." And Paolo almost swerve off road and kill them all he was laughing so hard.

"I'll take it!" exclaim little goofy man and they all laugh.

It was joke. Don't really have Jason Momoa or The Rock as goofy little man in sweater. With CGI they could pull it off, but if you really serious would be much easier to get Dana Carvey or somebody. Rock, Momoa, or both could be Swami's henchmen.

Vincenzo and Paolo think they know a good route to our village. There are old farm roads and alleys that are kind of hidden and some our allies keep them open just for us. Vincenzo help Paolo navigate, and Tomasz in the back with the goofy guy was the lookout. The distance as I say is 18 km as the falcon soars, but with all the twists and turns and stopping and waiting to see if coast is clear and also they took a wrong turn once and have to back up, well after an hour they were still less than halfway there! It was taking so long. It actually remind Tomasz of his ordeal in the tunnels below, how longer it took than if he just walk straight to edge of escarpment above ground! He tried to be patient, and just focused on being good lookout. He just couldn't wait to laugh and sing with us again, his people. He couldn't wait to dance all the old dances with us again. That Naughty Sow is going to get a good spanking tonight! And he hope maybe there will be some warm steamy Hfeergs to pop open to celebrate his return! But most of all he missed us so much, his family, and me, his best friend. He wanted to hear all our voices and see all our faces again. He know when he do the kisses alone will take 10 minutes. Tomasz smile to himself as he turn his head to look out window at the lovely valley morning as 1995 Dodge Caravan made slow ascent up the hallowed old road. I know I use that before, but I like it. Nothing about it fit this situation, and it was '94 Caravan anyway, but fuck you, write your own story. Oop, bomb.



IV. The Shrine of Saint Maximilian Kolbe

Tomasz say it was a cool evening there in Jeep ride with the wind blowing through all of their hair and what little goofy man had left. Tomasz was losing his patients. They keep hitting the snags and delays and Jeep got stuck at one point! Tomasz and Vincenzo both think they seen some sketchy stuff a few places. Shadow here, movement there. The longer the trip take the more it seem like something will go wrong. "Maybe Paolo can get you not all of way but most of way there, Tomasz!" Vincenzo say. Tomasz agree that yes, even if it is a few km from our village he can still make it in time to celebrate tonight, it is Friday night after all, everyone will be up late, and the Hfeerg will be warmed up and flowing! And it is then when Tomasz can show up and show everybody his aliveness, it will be best Friday night ever! Yeah Tomasz you right, that would been best Friday night ever but no it was not, it was one of saddest Friday nights of my life, that 2nd Friday after you left us, where the hell were you? You were so close to here! What happened? Yes, I know, it's a long story. Oh, Tomasz. I cried so many tears for you. Not as many as Krzysztof cried. But I cry a lot too. Tomasz say he know. He cry a lot for us too. And so we both cry. Cry cry cry. Are you crying too? Do you need the tissues? We have our kerchiefs, we'll be fine. All of this crying and sadness, it is now when we need some funny clown to brighten up our faces.

"Hey, look at me!" little man in sweater said with his goofy smile. He produce a small red pepper from the pocket of his goofy pants and hold it up by the stem with his goofy little fingers for them all to see. Paolo and Vincenzo look back from front seat. Don't worry, Paolo was being careful. "This pepper is called a Naga Viper," goofy man say with look of wonder. "It's one of the world's hottest peppers. 1.35 million units on the Scoville Heat Scale!" Then he ask with devilish grin, "Do you want to see me eat it?"

In the Jeep there was long silence. Finally they all agree, sure goofy guy let's see what you got, eat the hot pepper. Goofy man smiled real big and goofy. They start chanting for him. Goofy! Guy! Goofy! Guy! He brought the pepper close to his mouth. And then, he ate it. He hate the super hot pepper. The whole thing right there, in a few seconds. They couldn't belief it. It didn't even bother him. Paolo and Tomasz both look at Vincenzo in amazement and then they all give goofy man in sweater a little applause.

“Woo, that's hot!” goofy little man exclaim fanning his goofy now red face and pulling at his sweater and he smile one of goofiest smiles he ever smile in his whole goddamn goofy life in satisfaction.

“Well, all right, goofy fellow!” Paolo say. “Look like there's more to you than meets the eye!”

“He's still pretty goofy,” Vincenzo say, and they all agree. Vein in goofy man's nose start sticking out which combine with his red face from the pepper make him look like angry beet and they all burst into laughter but then he have to agree with them and admit that yes, he was still pretty damn goofy.

Then they got captured. By dictator's forces. What, you want me to work up to it? They got captured, that's all. It was ambush, they were well hidden, men in armored vehicles. Tomasz was looking out carefully and still didn't see them. In a minute the four of them were standing outside Jeep with their hands in the air as soldiers pointed rifles at them. The commander, who Paolo think look a little like Kevin Kline began interrogating them of their business. He don't like the looks of the three homeboys. But he was puzzled by little goofy man in sweater, how out of place he was with the others. He saw goofy man have something in his hand and ask what it is.

Goofy little man was trembling in fear but smiling. "S-sir, this is a Carolina Reaper pepper!" Paolo, Vincenzo, and Tomasz froze. "It's the world's hottest pepper! 2.2 million Scoville Heat Units. W-would you like to see me eat it?"

"No, I would not," answered commander. "Sensory acclimation. You eat spicier and spicier foods over time and it simply desensitizes your taste buds. Anyone could do it. Drop the pepper, please." It fell to the ground as man's goofy smile faded.

"Oh, is that all it is..." Vincenzo discuss with Paolo.

"Shut up!" commander shouted doing just exactly as someone called that would. "What is going on with this weird little party? What are the four of you up to?"

"We're just out for a spin with our... uncle!" Paolo try to explain. The commander look septical.

"I... I don't know these guys! They kidnapped me! They're bad guys." Paolo and Vincenzo look at each other, stunned. "D-do you know, I am friends with the councilman! Well, not good friends. But I know him. His wife is the dean of the university where I teach! We're friends. Well, not good friends. But I know her!"

Commander was silent for a moment. "You, the goofy one. Come with us. We'll check out your credentials and see if you're for real. You other three get over here."

The three of them look at one another in disbelief. Goofy guy, not you! We had such high hope for you. We thought you were funny and goofy but really you just another asshole. The councilman! Really, goofy guy? And even your stupid hot pepper game was kind of a dud. Fuck you, you goofy little fuck. And your stupid sweater.

“Goodbye, guys, it was fun!” he says sheepishly as he leaves with the officers. “Could I please have some cold milk?” was the last thing they hear him say to them.

And Tomasz was mad and disappointed by the goofy man like his friends were, but in that instant he thinks of the milk he drank for breakfast straight from a sweet cow's udder that very morning, and almost feels bad for him. For Tomasz is friends with no councilman, but he doubts this great joy and pleasure is one the goofy little man in the sweater will ever know.

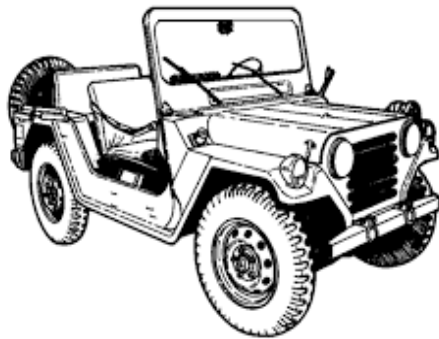
Okay, so now we're getting to the point. You were captured! That where you've been all these months? But Paolo and Vincenzo escape somehow? Yes, I hear about Paolo and Vincenzo, only a few weeks ago, they are still around, I think, in the underground, fighting for us, helping us to survive, they're out there somewhere, Paolo and Vincenzo! It is too bad somehow word never got back to us from them they were with you! And that you were so close to home! They would want us to know! But that is what it is like in this life of ours. Messages get lost. We pass like wind in the night. Only I have lived to hear of the Friday night ride from Schwerviefenburg. Like everything else Tomasz tells me here it is part of his story only I will never know. And whatever dumbasses read this, if it survives the bombs. So Tomasz. Where were you? In prison camp? And later you escape? Cut to the car chase. Tomasz has to tell me every single detail and every little thing he thought and all of his feelings at every moment. At this rate I will have Tolkien's trilogy by the time he is

done. But I guess is nothing better to do than sit with him here and type while the bombs entertain us. There is no pole left to stripe, no beet can left to eat. But just to be here with him is enough by itself. And to laugh and sing and dance with him. We are the village now, it is just us. And to stroke his curly hair and his furry neck. He like someone to hug him and cuddle with him when he is cold. It is not like that between Tomasz and I. We are the best of friends. We were never boyfriends. But one time I tell Tomasz if he was gay and we lived in nice country where it was legal I would ask him to marry me. But he is not. And we not live in a country like that. I not pretend nothing ever happen between me and Tomasz. But that is because of our great love for one another. We love the other so much and we want to make each other feel good. Not often, but sometimes. I'm sorry, Tomasz. Did I say too much? Am I oversharing? It's okay. Nobody will ever read this. And you know how I feel.

We are tired and it is getting dark. Tomorrow is the big day. It's first day of Christmas! Tomasz and I have agree to exchange a gift. It will be funny to see what we come up with in this hellhole. I have to make mine really good, because I afraid Tomasz already has mine beet. Get it, beet? Because he brought beet and Hfeerg yesterday when he show up, so my gift must be so good to match his already gift. That way he doesn't have me beet. Doesn't that just beet all? Oop, bomb. Never mind. We tired but we go on a little longer.

Tomasz promise he go faster now. He still have 4 months more of his story to tell! He was in temporary prison camp for few days. He will not even describe conditions. Then they transport him and many others on train cars to big prison camp very far away! Holy shit. But Tomasz you got out of prison camp, you are here now. How did you escape and get back here? There's your big story right there! We hear all this dumb stuff about swamis and goofy men, where is big prison break? You bury the lead pipe.

He tell me only a little more tonight. He was in prison camp for a long time. There was confrontation with guard, it was misunderstanding, they put him in solitary. He was cold and alone. It was many weeks. He sustain himself with beautiful memories of our village, like I told you I do, like we both do now even as we make last few of these beautiful memories together! But he was so alone he made friends with family of roaches living inside empty matchbook with him in his tiny dark cell. He would save crumbs from his rotten meals to feed to them. He had names for them all, his favorite was Massimo, man that little guy was a trooper! He really went after those crumbs! Then one day when they let him out to stretch his legs in the yard when he went back they were gone. The pest control got rid of them. No matchbook even, but then he see one little roach left lying quivering on its back. Tomasz pretty sure it was Massimo. He cried for two days. They were only friends he had. And he believe they have right to live on this earth just like every other beautiful creature, even if it is beauty we do not understand. Tomasz, come here, it's all right. They were roaches. They lived a good full roachy life. You have me now. We have each other. We are tired, it's too dark to type, we go to bed now, it's enough for now. And so Miklas and Tomasz went to that favorite place of our people, the land of dreams where all the dear things we lost come and pay us cheerful visits. Hm, I like that. Should I been a writer, Tomasz? Okay. Good night, Tomasz.



V. The Shrine of Lord Rama and Hanuman His Faithful Comrade

Hey. This is Tomasz. I find candle for light. I can never sleep Christmas Eve. Too much excited. Miklas sleeps. Poor Miklas. He is so angry. I have to hold his hand and say prayer with him to calm him down. But I love him. I'm so glad I get to spend one more Christmas with him. I know he will not belief rest of my story, so I want to tell you myself. Maybe you don't think my story is true too. I swear on stack of Chilton manuals again. So here it is. I was in prison camp not four month, but eight year. I never escape, I was let out only when the invaders swap prisoners with our side. So no prison break, only prisoner swap. Not sound so exciting does it? So I made it back to our village. It was still smoking ruin. I ask few people there they know nothing I wander around searching for my people, asking all I saw. More walking! But you know I born for this journey. I never did find my mama, my papa, my other mama, Krzysztof, Miklas, not even Vincenzo or Paolo. I cry for 10 days. I walk around in a daze. I fell completely lost. But I got opportunity from our allies who help liberate me to go across ocean to their country and start new life. Life was so different from any I ever know before. Their language so difficult to learn. But it was nice country, I got an okay job, I met a great woman and fall in love and marry her, we settle down and have kids and grow old together. It was then I learn how to cook, I practice and got better like I told Miklas! I still no cook as good as him, or my mama, or my papa, or my other mama, or even Krzysztof. But better than I did. I bring many our village tradition to my new country. They learn how to dance Ploughmans Daughter Pluck The Chicken too. Beet was not a part of their diet. Now it is. Yes I know. All these scenes and jokes. Are stolen. You want to talk about originality, Miklas and me we want to talk about. Humanity. And humaneness. Not just to animals.

And to animals. It is very important. But humaneness to humans. Humaneness to humans too. That is why we are here you reading this. That is why we are here typing this in our last minutes. All for you. All so you can know. So that maybe something will get through. But yes I share village of my youth with my new city in this distant land. My kerchiefs great conversation starter and I teach everyone of the old country and my friends and family I remember and I describe every inch of our sacred river from the mountains to the shrines! They no have all right ingredient for a good Hfeerg over there but I make substitution and get it pretty close. Close enough! I turn a few locals onto it. Not many I guess. I have to assure them it is almost good as the stuff Miklas and me use to make in the old country. I become active in our city. I volunteer as pole-stripping coach. They have it there too! Our neighbors friendly, help us care for the wild cats, feed them, get them fixed, their shots. And you know about my walking. I walk so much there too just like I use to do. I take long walks with my wife and many everywhere on my own just like when I was young. Like Miklas said walk anywhere on this earth and you are walking where I walk. Its more true now than what he know! I love to walk everywhere and see all the beautiful things there are to see. When I am walking I am in my groove. Cool winds fan the glades, trees crowd into shade where I sit, blushing flowers rise, and all things flourish. So yeah I keep on doing that. We, me my wife our kids find a great church full of compassionate souls to attend and find solace and community. You should seen all their smiling faces. Every age and color and from every background and walk of life. And the pastor give a hell of a sermon. Our church it was not Eastern Chyroptical as in which Krzysztof and Miklas and me was extremely strictly raised. No its more liberal for sure. Any other church is! But this church, you know that prayer? The prayer to Saint Mathilde there at the shrine. This church live by every word of that prayer. No not all the names but you know the part. We help those who are lost and hungry and homeless in the city. Those who can help more pull up those who falling behind. This church is part of network of churches from all over the world from every religious faith who united in this mission. The network of churches

have a word they use: Yawalla. It is a word that go beyond language, a word they use as greeting for all people, all races, all religions, to share their common bond in doing this good work of the Lord for humanity. And so they say when meeting "Yawalla!" or "Yawalla to you, my brother" or "and so we say Yawalla." You can use it a lot of ways. At end of something you just said is good. In our church they make acrostic out of it and it say You Are Worth Abundance Love Light Always. You Are Worth Abundance Love Light Always. And the church have a tall banner for services that have that acrostic and it's orange and blue, which just so happen my favorite colors. And after the word Love is a orange heart and after the word Light is a candle lighting the darkness, just like that tiny light in the tunnels that led me to freedom and this new life. It's a beautiful life, not perfect, some struggles. After all I been through its better than anything I expect. I thank the Lord and all the saints and shrines and stars for it every day. And so I live in happiness. Pretty soon my children having their own kids and I realize one day everything the old crone on dirt road to Geferdefelle tell me was coming true. My new family had so much love and good times. Hard times too but we have each other. By now I'm pretty old. After many year I retire from my job. More free time I can put into Yawalla relief effort at church and in community. I got chance to travel back to old country and I take it. How you think I got there? I took a big jet plane! Not really, I walked. All the way to the coast of that faraway continent where a boat took me across the ocean. Was pretty nice cruise actually. Then I got off at the Port of Europe and walk from there to well there nother boat then more walking then ferry then train then more walking but point is I make it at last to the waters so I can see that majestic Schroot plunging one more time into the lush valley. And one more time to visit the grottoes and to say one last prayer to Our Blessed Saint Mathilde. And to bathe one more time in the sacred pools that are warm and bubbly as a good Hfeerg. And then at last I went to our village. How you think I got there? No I didn't walk. I took riverboat! So one last time I could feel the spray of that roaring river on my face. I get off at our village. Or is it? I check coordinates. This can't be the place I

thought. I recognize nothing. Then I see where two road come together in a certain way and sure enough yes, that Starbuck where the nail and pickle shop was. This village I see here was nice sure. But it was not the village Miklas and I know. I went back to new country almost sorry I gone, wishing my last vision of home was the falls and Mathildes kind face and not that redevelop village that look more like new strip mall than clumsy broken-down hamlet where we grew up. That place was gone forever. But this gave me new appreciate ya of my new home. Then I realize. That city, my corner of it, there on other side of earth, that is the village now. It is the rightful heir to the title. I Tomasz its lone survivor long ago planted its flag there in the New World as conqueror. The village lives! It lives not just in my heart and mind and soul like it did those 8 long days in tunnels, those 8 long years in prison. Its a real village here and now and I am its mayor. And when I am gone the village will remain in everyone here I have touched. It will live forever. But I will not. I got very old, my wife pass away, and many friends I made do too. Pretty soon there more people I miss than people I know. To die young, is it really so tragic, before so many things we loved have been lost? And yet I wore it with a smile to encourage the young folk. Those who are left and all their young ones treat me like a king and it feels good. I still walk some but it's not like before. My family spoil me with all my favorite foods because they know how I love to eat. After 8 days starving in the tunnels and 8 years of prison food, you can't imagine how delicious each bite taste. Pretty soon it look like the old crone at Geferdefelle will even be right about my age. My family plan a big 100 birthday party for me. Then one day I read newspaper it say the dictator has finally died! I couldn't belief. Not just he live that old, even older than me. But that it took so long for him to be defeat. For it been only 8 year since his trial for war crimes, only 10 year since the world finally rise up and topple his despotic rule that murder our people and many others. Then I thought well that's cool I guess. So I got ready for my birthday party and I want to look nice for them so I put on a nice suit and a tie and my little glasses and I wear this special kerchief my niece gave me for occasion. And then I got abducted by aliens. It

just happened, that's all. They were those Greys everyone sees. They told me they were taking me away and I could never come back. I had no choice. But where I was going would be something very good and they smile very small smiles at me. Are you taking me to heaven? Is this how it actually happens? No, Earthling. That's a different department. I ask them please at least let me have my birthday party, will only be few hours and they say no Earthling we must leave now. Then I ask them to plant false memory in my loved ones minds that we have birthday party and it was wonderful and then afterward I say I am going for a walk so that later on when they don't find me they feel proud that I die doing what I love and at my age make it so far they can't even find the body. Aliens look at each other. Then please let me go downstairs to kitchen and take most of the food, so they won't get confuse they have party but food is still there. Also, I want that food. For the ride. In your flying saucer or whatever. You are taking me against my will. I deserve at least this request. The little Greys rolled their eyes but smiled. We will do as you request, Earthling. Then all that food materialize right there before me. Well not all. 87% with residue in partially randomized scatter to simulate human consumption one of them say. The food before me, floating before me waiting for me to take is in clear containers that are themselves edible. These Greys are very practical. They make no displays that seem kind. Their kindness is to be direct and efficient. No friendly shit shat to waste anybody's time. I think they gotten a bad rap. They remind me of the French. And they have not try to probe me anywhere not yet anyway. I grab the clear containers in my arms and we go. On their spaceship. I guess that's what it was. I could see all around me. It was completely clear like we were in a bubble me and the Greys as they fly the spaceship and having little discussions and looking back with tiny grins at me as I float there with the edible food containers. They take me on a tour of Barnards Loop, teach me how to pronounce Betelgeuse correctly, hit Orion Nebula to fly me through the Giant Horsehead. They show me many sights of the Orion Arm. They took me by the Pillars of Creation where I saw a million stars being born of a thousand clouds. I saw such things I never dreamed.

And I thought this life this amazing life how is it such a life as this can happen to me? And I gaze in wonder at the endless seas of light and life and abundance and I wonder what tiny part I have played in it all even in my long life. Then that it for the sightseeing. The Greys have a schedule to meet. We go too fast to see anything outside my bubble and I settle in to eat my birthday dinner. When I finally open up all the clear containers I was speechless to see all the array of fine foods spread out before me waiting for me to devour. There was Mecklenburg roast ribs and Kalingrad meatballs; Swabian dumplings in cream sauce and baked smoked eel; potato pancakes with applesauce and bacon-wrapped fried asparagus spears; spaetzle with sheep milk pecorino and spaghetti with meatballs; whole roast duck with apple compote and smoked sardines with Peloponnese olives on ciabatta toast. There was schnitzels and rouladen and fine Dylewska ham. There was cabbage rolls and crepes. There was green salads and fruit salads and potato salads and jello salads and even a beetroot salad (I think I skip that since I get enough of it at home). To drink there was Mosel wines and real Champagne and sweet tea and unsweet tea and Big Red and Belgian ale. For dessert there was red groats, gingerbread, black bread pudding, elderberry soup, sour cream cake, poppy seed cake, Black Forest cake, and three different flavor of wheat blintzes. Also there was bratwursts, currywursts, and kielbasa; goulash, barbacoa, sauerbraten, and hunter's stew with hearty pumpernickel; red borscht with mushroom dumplings; Black Sea sturgeon caviar with homemade kettle-cooked potato chips; and mac and cheese. And it was all delicious. No I did not eat all of it. I'm 100 years give me a break. But I give everything a taste at least with all those container floating before me with my edible spork while I watch the whole universe and all its majesties play before me. I can't help think the whole time no matter what very good thing the Greys promise me it can't be nothing better than this. Then suddenly I realize we are somewhere else. We are beyond the stars somehow. I am as with giant whales the size of galaxies swimming with glimmering sleek bodies in oceans of cosmic heaven pulsing with waves of aquamarine and ultramarine and cerulean and sea green and sky

blue and indigo and white. The white light around me grows, I am blinded. I am shaking. Then the light subside and I let down my kerchief and open my eyes. I can't belief. It's Lord Rama, incarnation of Vishnu, floating before me along with his faithful comrade Hanuman the monkey god. I study about them many year ago in Hindu temple. Their great love and brave deeds and devotion to one another. How Hanumans journey, a journey toward greater oneness with everything, must be our journey as well. Hindu temple was same place I learn our Sun the star around which Earth orbit is not the original Sun but a replacement. Maybe I guess. But I study all the religions of the world. Because such understanding is foundation for good Yawalla. See that nother way you can use that word. I also study science. Because the secrets of how the universe consists is a key to something that unite all things. And now the aliens with their technology that make best in our world seem more primitive than stone tools how those aliens bring me here to some spirit realm beyond all Creation where an avatar of Vishnu himself float before me and I wonder how it all related. Its too much to ponder. But I have no time because Lord Rama speak to me. Greetings, Earth being. You have won a prize. He smile and Hanuman clap and bare his teeth a little. He is all chummy with Rama, hangs onto him a lot. Rama continue reading a little card. Let's see what is this ah yes Distance Perambulation! Centenarian Division. Hanuman clap and shriek. Rama laugh easy Hanuman, pace yourself we have five more of these today! I just floated there unable to speak or move. Distance Perambulation! You walked a lot. And also you're really old. 100 years, Earth being, impressive Rama applauded as did Hanuman getting a little out of control as Rama laughed. And now for your prize. You may return to any time within your own lifetime for a period of two revolutions of your home planet. For some planets it's three revolutions because they spin faster and some complained that only two was unfair. Rama smile and I get sense he is use to speechless award recipient like me. You have two days, earth being. You may return to any time in your life. You will be the same age you were at that time. But here is an important stipulation. The place of your return must not be a

location at which you were present at the time. We can't have two of you running around together down there. It would wreck things. You have to be some ways away from your original location. Do you understand, Earth being? I nodded yes. You can go back at any age you choose. But your location must be chosen carefully. You can go anywhere in the world you want. You could visit the Taj Mahal, the great temple of Angkor Wat, the Bay of Naples where stood Port Julius of old where brave Misenus great friend of Aeneas perished after besting jealous Triton on his conch. You can go to Las Vegas. But it must not be any location at which you were present. Hanuman get real serious look on his great ape face. I think about it. After 100 years I get 2 more days, to live over again? And it is all because of my walking. I knew it will be good for something one day. And so I think about my whole long life and all the good things since I been old but it does not take long for me to decide and I answer Lord Rama I know where and when I want to go. I would like to be one more time with my brother Krzysztof, on Christmas Day. And Rama say I'm sorry Earth being there was not one Christmas that you and Krzysztof spent apart. You and he were together for every Christmas he had and Hanuman frown and so do I but I know next what my answer will be and I say in that case I would like to be one more time on Christmas Day with my good friend Miklas. There was pause and Rama say very well Earth being and Hanuman shriek with delight and so do I and Rama say you may take with you two gifts, sorry no duplicates, I don't make the rules and I say I would like two bottles of Hfeerg, any temperature, to drink with my best friend Miklas and Rama say it is done with Hanuman clapping and then I say could you please put me in different clothes because I still had on my birthday clothes for the party don't want to show up for Miklas in old man birthday suit so Rama ask the same garments you wore at the time and I remember that when I was in solitary and I plead no little nicer than that and Rama say it is done and Hanuman go crazy as Lord Rama finally finish then I hereby confer upon you your gift of... 2 revolutions... not to exceed... sorry I have to read all this, it's required... Rama was fading out, all my senses overloaded.

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

When I appear I know exactly where I am in an instant. I look down and marvel at my young again body. I see my shabby old clothes and my kerchiefs and my bare feet. Then I see the Hfeerg I have in each hand. It really worked. Thank you, Lord Rama. Thank you, all gods. Thank you, saints and angels and stars and planets and beauty and joy and light. Thank you, universal love and life. Then I go thru the alley way and those Silesians hit me up. They get me every time. I can not help it. I haggle one bottle Hfeerg for bunch fresh beets with greens. I should been more specific about location I guess. And then just before I get to Miklas house there was a mad goat attack me and wrestle me for the beets and it got away with all but one. Then I smile to myself because a goat need a meal too and I still got one Hfeerg left plus a pretty good beet and knock on Miklas door to his great surprise. There then at last my good friend Miklas is the end of the story of where I been all this damn time. Merry Christmas, Miklas. Merry Christmas, World. Yawalla. Tomasz.



VI. The Shrine of Saint Nicholas

What the fuck did Tomasz do? What is all this shit? Did he fall asleep at typewriter? With fingers pressing down on all keys at once? It's his prison break he says! Ha ha ha. He type it out for me! Oh I know I am going to enjoy reading that shit but maybe later. Hey, everybody. IT'S CHRISTMAS DAY!!!! Ha ha that's right. Against all odds, we made it! Looks like we mated! Ha ha ha. It is Tomasz' favorite day of the year and because it is, it is mine too! So here we are overflowing with the Christmas cheer. And not much else. But hey we find a Hymnal and we sing all the old Eastern Chyroptic Christmas songs. And we have no instruments just broken guitars but I sing the melody because I'm pretty good singer I'm a tenor and Tomasz he sing the bass. He always love the low tones and he have a real feel for the bass line how it support the melody how together they imply the harmony. Then you put some feel into it and you got the rhythm. Just two people singing but all the music is there. I love to sit around and sing with Tomasz but our throats dry now because there isn't much water. So now maybe we move on to find out who Tomasz or me made shittier Christmas gift in this place out of all this blown to shreds crap.

First I get Tomasz gift to me out of the way. Tomasz want to let me win I think because he doesn't want to beet me you understand and he think of my feelings. So he make his gift kind of funny but real sweet. So what he did is he gather a lot of empty beet can about 60 of them and he tape them all together end to end and wrap it with brown paper and set that in concrete foundation to make pole for us to stripe! I laugh my asses off! The flimsy thing is useless for climbing of course. But it put the hugest smile on my face. I spend so much time laughing at the way it bend and wobble when we move it from one spot to another, and specially when a big wind kick up and knock it over I almost forget that I have gift for Tomasz as well.

So my gift to Tomasz well I cheated ha ha. It's my house. I got some things sock away. Not much. But yesterday or was it day before when Tomasz telling me about that silly retreat and his bath at the waters I remember I have a little garden statue of St. Francis of Assisi hid in stairwell where he is protect little bit from the bombs. I take break from this obsessive typing to look for him and sure enough he is fine and I decide to convert him into a statue of St. Mathilde! I cut up beet can, see I use beet can too ha ha and place it on Francis tonsured bald head as Mathildes crown. And I glue real dead sparrow to his back as the Heinrichsfalke. Tomasz love it.

So anyway thank you Tomasz for really a pretty shitty Christmas to be honest ha. But any day is a good day when my bro Tomasz is here by my side do we have a bromance Tomasz? Should we make buddy cop movie? Well folks. All 2 of you who will read this before burning it for heat, there only one sheet of paper left, Tomasz going to wipe his ass with it and we have nothing left to say. Tomasz go through the tunnels, have his prison break and make it back here to spend our last Christmas together. We celebrate Christmas not just for us but for the whole village. Miklas and Tomasz are the whole village. We are the last stand. Against the dictator the dictator will be defeated he will one day be defeated it will be long after we are gone Tomasz but one day. He will. I believe he will I got it right that time. And by then our village I guess will be gone. It will live only in spirit. In the hearts of our people or whatever horseshit. Every trace of our home may be distant memories of a village one hardly want to remember. But listen to us. The country bumpkins with their precious little village the village the village maybe they make a musical about it ha ha ha. Disgusting. I feel like a character. The village! The village suck I'm glad its gone and we die with it. I be surprise if even one trace of it remain Tomasz looking at me funny what is it its that washermaid isn't it? I am still holding onto the washermaid theory of where ya been all this damn time. Tomasz always with your little secrets. There something he keeping from me I can tell. All them long walks he take you never know oop

Bomb. Bomb. Bomb bomb bomb. Bomb bomb. Bomb. That all you got dictator Bomb. Bomb. Bomb bomb bomb. Bomb bomb. Bomb. Bomb. Bomb. Bomb bomb bomb. Bomb bomb. Bomb. Okay. Bomb. Bomb. Bomb bomb bomb. Bomb. Bomb. That one was a dud I think Bomb never mind. Bomb bomb. Bomb bomb. Bomb. Bomb. And bomb.

Well there you are folks. Our gifts did not make it. But Tomasz and Miklas are still here. We are unharmed. We were both always lucky that way. We were born for this journey. Tomasz say ya what? Yawala? What does that mean Tomasz? Yawalla. 2 L. Okay sure fine Yawalla Tomasz so anyway that's all Porky Pig. Miklas and Tomasz go have their Christmas celebrations now. For the village. It's a Village Christmas! So you don't hear from us again. We go bye bye now. But I want say one last thing. The one person who will read this. Do not get comfortable. Do not live a life of comfort. Recognize suffering and strive to relieve it. Don't increase it so you avoid any sacrifice. Recognize when your actions cause it even indirectly even if you didn't mean it and have the guts to admit it. Do not say I vote this way so I have done my part to help humanity. Do not say I put my tithe into the collection plate and my church helps plenty on my behalf. Do not say I worked enough all my life and spend your old age feeding selfish desires in ignorance of all the much suffering around you. Do more if you can. If you can't then you can't. Peace. If you can and just won't don't pretend to stand for something you don't. Then that stand is nothing but a stance for an image. It's phony. You aren't fooling anybody with it. Except maybe yourself. Now if you are the suffering, if one of the suffering is you, oh fam now this is for you because me and Tomasz we have suffered and so we know so we feel ya all right and this what we want say to all y'all say this is what we want to say to all y'all are you with me say You are worth love. The love of family friend and helpmate. The love of community nation and world. You are worth light. The light that shines as hope when all around is dark. The light by which we read the knowledge that may guide us to a brighter future. You are worth abundance. The abundance of days of clean water and nights

without hunger. The abundance of refuge from the despot and shelter from the storm. No human being of any nation or any race or any wealth is undeserving of these things. You are worth it. Somebody should make a good slogan out of that.

OK. That's all we let you go now. Say bye bye Tomasz. We gonna go be with our mamas and our papas and our sisters and our brothers and our kitty cats and our doggy dogs and all the saints up in Heaven now. And little Massimo the roach. Up there in roach heaven ha ha. Poor Massimo. It's OK Tomasz let's go hey it is my turn to be the Naughty Sow oh ho I can't wait my rump already aches from your firm Fisherman spansks MERRY CHRISTMAS FROM THE VILLAGE EVERYBODY! HO HO HO YOUR A GREAT BIG HO!!

Oh I almost forgot. DELETE BROWSER HISTORY. OK. Bye-bye.

Oh! One more thing I



VII. Shrine to the Glorious Future of Our People

“We assemble today to dedicate this monument to the little village that once stood in this spot. The centerpiece of the exhibit is a rare artifact, a hand-typed manuscript by two of its last known survivors. Unfortunately, we have had to censor a few lines of this precious historical text for reasons of national security. But it stands as a testament to the will and determination of our people, whom I love with all my heart,” the speaker gestured with his hand over his chest, to the applause and cheers of his audience. “I have fought tirelessly for years to make this project a reality. I think you will all agree with me that this large... rutabaga-like structure... is a fitting tribute, and what a stroke of luck that of all the artists that the Historical Panel considered, the Dictator's grand-nephew turned out to be the perfect choice to design it. We thank the Dictator today, who as we know has turned out to be not so bad as the lying media has always said. Life is good! Life is beautiful for everyone. The old village was... what would you call it... quaint? Charming? But let's face it, it was a dirty place full of poor, dirty people. Look at your village now! What a beautiful village... on the shores of the mighty Uulge! Clean streets! No crime! Plenty of food for everyone! Affordable wireless broadband! Department chairs funded at the university! We're hosting a Zizek conference next spring. And let us not forget... new uniforms for the pole-stripers! And it is my work... our... work... that has made it all a reality! I thank you! And my salary and pension, which you have just voted to double, also thank you! Don't forget to purchase a commemorative kerchief at the concession stands. All proceeds go directly to my foundation. Enjoy this festive day!”

The people cheered the speaker as he walked the 20 feet from the lectern to his waiting limousine. Mirga Verforden was there with her news crew to cover the event. The new village, built on the ruins of the old one, was indeed a beautiful sight, with rolling knolls and fine architecture. All the new villagers were gathered in the square, smiling and happy, wearing their kerchiefs, eating tasty foods and drinking pints of Vjongen's Hfeerg. "All hail the Councilman!" they cried. "Long live the Councilman!" The man, who looked remarkably like Robert DeNiro, turned to acknowledge the crowd before ducking into his car, smiling broadly as he waved with one hand, while with the other he unwrapped a brightly-colored cloth from around his neck. The style section of the Schrootenseehallener Zeitung described the garment as "a distinctly postmodern-looking scarf."



A Word from the Editor

When we first began on our own to publish *Seven Shrines of the River Uulge* two years ago, I was pleased to announce that the primary source material on which this work is based was thereby being presented for the very first time to the world in a form not marred by the political censorship it had been subjected to for many years. Our Spanish edition appeared a year ago, and since then we have had increasing interest from all over the world. As I write this, editions are being prepared by other publishers in German, French, Italian and Polish, with others soon to follow in Portuguese, Hungarian, Bengali, Hindustani, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Russian, Dutch, Afrikaans, Swahili, Czech, Rumanian, Turkish, Farsi, Arabic and Greek! This worldwide interest signals exciting times ahead for the Yawalla movement and its global interfaith humanitarian mission, and we are thrilled beyond words to be a part of it. For this second edition, we would like once again to apologise for the crude illustrations accompanying the publication, and regret in particular the outcry from a few of you that not even one drawing is of Matilda of Ringelheim herself, the saint around whom so much of the text centers. The truth is that we aren't good artists, we are committed still to spending not one penny on art that should be going to the poor, and that among the free line drawings we could find online there was not a solitary one of St. Matilda that had a decent Heinrichsfalke in it, and as of this writing there still isn't one.

However, I am now pleased to announce that for the upcoming 3rd edition of *Seven Shrines* or *7 Shrines*, or you can just call it *Shrines*, I think I heard Madge in the binding room call it *Shrinesy* the other day, we have just located an artist to produce original artwork for the project! She is someone who shares our commitment to the values of Yawalla and she's as willing to work for free or for food as the rest of us here. So a big YAWALLA shoutout to her and to all of you beautiful sisters working here with me at Koala Bare. God love you all! I know Miklas and Tomasz are smiling down from heaven on all of us right now. What it means is that we can have line illustrations by this professional quality artist not just for *7 Shrines*, but also for the companion series of books we're producing next based on newly unearthed manuscripts, huge announcement here, that Miklas himself typed years before the present one on the very same typewriter, in which he recounted some of his adventures with Tomasz, Krzysztof, Paolo, Vincenzo, and many others. The transcription of this work and its assembly into one or more

pleasing collections is a labour of love for us and we hope you're patient with us as we give it the attention it truly deserves. These new volumes will be exactly as the old ones you've fallen in love with, 4 by 6, small to fit in the pocket of a stranger, sewn in 16-page signatures, printed on graciously donated acid-free paper for a long life, and hand-bound with hand-embossed sturdy cloth covers with no dust jacket, like an old friend, ready for use, ready to be read, ready to be distributed to all those who could use a message of hope or who are ready to listen. We insist that we don't produce a luxury product. We produce a proud product with our hands and some ink and some thread and a few old machines that is worthy of the Yawalla mission, worthy of a respectable donation, and we have found there are many buyers who will pay a considerable amount and even some who will pay a great amount to own such simple traditional craftsmanship that is for such a good cause, and who will even donate half the books they purchase back to us so we can distribute them to the churches who are helping out refugees and the homeless. It's a beautiful thing, and it keeps feeding on itself and growing.

Now I think this might be a good time to dispel some odd rumours. It was leaked to the press that, as Metro Goldwyn Mayer had graciously deferred to Mr. Spielberg in his decision on the matter, we were to be consulted on the casting in particular with regard to Rama and Hanuman who as you know are not thus addressed in the text. And so when the reporter from Variety magazine, I didn't know any better, asked me who they will be, and I might have said something about Christian Bale and Danny DeVito in a joking manner, and then on social media there is suddenly a big kerfuffle about the casting decision. It was all in good fun, and I know that Steven, who has been so sweet to all of us, will make the perfect choice whomever it is. I already have to thank him so much for winging Hanks in to portray myself. I feel like I dine and gone to heaven as someone might say. And thanks to his wise persistence I did finally come around to the idea of it being a Christmas movie, despite my initial compunctions. Honestly, how could it not be, and I now feel a little silly for having thought so. Thanks to all the saints and Schroots and shrines and stars! May this venture too bring ever greater success to our sacred Yawalla mission. Madge just told me an order for 50 books was just placed by a certain Mr. DiCaprio, who has promised to outbid our best offers. We keep hitting the stars and we'll keep aiming for them. And thanks to all of you out there who have helped keep this dream alive and thriving. We, all of us, were born for this journey. And so now say we all YAWALLA! YAWALLA! YAWALLA! YAWALLA! YAWALLA!

– M. D. Scott, Editor in Chief, Koala Bare Books

A Note on Saint Maximilian Kolbe

Raymund Kolbe was born in Poland on January 8, 1894. At age 12 he had a vision of the Virgin Mary, who offered him two crowns: a white one if he wished to pursue a life of purity, and a red one if he wished to become a martyr; he chose both. Thereafter he dedicated his life to the devotion of the Immaculate Virgin. He joined the Franciscans along with his older brother the following year and was given the religious name Maximilian, professing his first vows at age 17. In his twenties he was ordained as a priest and earned doctorates in both philosophy and theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University. He founded a religious publishing press and a monastery, later traveling to both Japan and India to establish monasteries there. He returned to Poland in 1936 due to poor health.

After Germany invaded Poland early in World War II, and despite having German ancestry, he refused to sign a document that would have recognized him as a German citizen, and remained at his monastery. There he established a temporary hospital, provided shelter for many refugees, and hid two thousand Jews from Nazi persecution. After his press issued many anti-Nazi publications, the monastery was finally shut down in February 1941 and he was arrested by the Gestapo.

After three months at Pawiak prison he was taken to Auschwitz. He continued his priestly duties even at the death camp, administering to all the souls around him for more than two months. He ended his life along with a group of men who were chosen to die by starvation and dehydration as a deterrent to escape attempts, volunteering to take the place of a man who had a wife and children. He led the men in prayers for two weeks and was the last to survive, finally being dispatched by his captors with an injection of carbolic acid on August 14, which became his feast day. His remains were cremated the following day, on the feast day of the Assumption of Mary. He was beatified in 1971 by Paul VI, and canonized in 1982 by John Paul II.

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